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**NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY  
NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE**

**NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY  
OF CHARLES DE GAULLE**

**CORE COURSE 1 ESSAY**

**Lt Col Carol C. Morehouse -- Class of 95  
FOUNDATIONS OF  
NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY  
DR. OTT**

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There is but one theme in the life of Charles de Gaulle, and that is power. His great agonizing devotion to France, his dreams and his exhortations to greatness, would have amounted to little more than the philosophical superpatriotism of a soldier-intellectual had he never been able to translate it all into the exercise of power. (Cook 15)

## BACKGROUND

Charles de Gaulle was driven by his vision of a return to French "global preeminence combined with a revitalization of French society" (Morse xi) --a resumption of French traditional world status. The destruction wrought on France in two world wars when England and America assisted too little or too late left de Gaulle with a deep distrust of reliance on others in matters of vital national security. The bitter experience of France's second-class status among the World War II Allies left de Gaulle with a lasting distaste for dealing in international affairs from a position of weakness.

When de Gaulle left power in 1946, France was "heavily damaged by the war, politically fractured by the experience of occupation and widespread collaboration and the presence of a large Communist movement, the nation labored under the cloud of defeat by the Germans in the initial phases of three wars." (Kaplan 82) World War II left France's economy in shambles, her infrastructure ruined, her agriculture destroyed, her military demoralized and her national spirit broken. Faced with the need for security and economic recovery, France and the rest of Western Europe were forced to depend on the United States for economic assistance and (through NATO) for defense.

## ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT FRANCE AND THE WORLD

Although recognizing that dependence was essential to France's survival, the French became increasingly uncomfortable with the perceived US dominance of the international system. American nuclear power was the epitome of this dominance shielding Western Europe from Soviet aggression but at the same time threatening to make Europe a nuclear battlefield in a future superpower confrontation. There was particular friction between the French and Anglo-American camps over security issues and employment conditions of NATO military forces. The European continent was divided between the East and the West as the Cold War pitted the two superpowers against one another for world domination. This bipolar confrontation resulted in an uneasy stalemate, but actually created the opportunity needed by de Gaulle to allow him to maneuver his nation back to greatness. (Kaplan 82-83)

During the 1950s, France was involved in Indochina and Algeria in colonial wars which created a debilitating drain of manpower and money. Constant American political and moral opposition to colonialism was an irritating affront to France in the difficult and internecine process of disengaging from an overseas empire. As European economies recovered, the strength of the American dollar and her continued dominance of the world economy fueled further resentment.

Assessing the international environment, de Gaulle realized it was crucial to resolve the crisis in Algeria, even at the cost of giving up French sovereignty over this territory which was politically integrated with metropolitan France. Confrontations and surrogate conflicts in the Third World would increasingly consume US resources and

attention and possibly embroil France in a superpower conflict. The increasing nuclear parity between the US and Soviet Union would increase strategic stability. This mutual ability of the super powers to destroy each other created a nuclear stalemate. Coupled with the importance to the US of the security of Western Europe, this rendered the risk of Soviet attack on Western Europe extremely small. (Kaplan 83-84)

### NATIONAL INTERESTS AND THREATS TO THEM

De Gaulle could not accept a diminished status for France in world affairs after World War II. Pragmatism and idealism combined to impel him to seek to carve for France a greater role. Pragmatically he believed that ultimately a state must rely on itself for its security since history had amply demonstrated to France that in a crisis even close allies would necessarily put their own vital interests first, or as de Gaulle observed, "Will Washington commit suicide to save Paris?" (Holsti 234). Spiritually de Gaulle believed that "France cannot be France without greatness." (Cook 11). Moreover, he believed that part of the ethos that made France a nation was the self vision of a great and civilizing power. "When France serves her national interests, then, she is also serving the cause of humanity." (Harrison 53). The cornerstone of post-war Britain's security could be her special relationship with the United States; but, France would provide for her own security, status and influence on her own merit, without dependence on the United States.

Restoration of her status as a global power combined with a revitalization of French society militarily, politically and economically were the cornerstones of de Gaulle's perception of French national interest. De Gaulle understood the relation

between France's national spirit and her role in the international arena. In the same sense that "manifest destiny" mobilized the American spirit in her expansion across North America, France's "universal mission" (Harrison 53) was a force to mobilize and unite the spirit of the French nation as she strove for independence from the superpowers. Integral to the achievement of this independence was French independent control of the means of her own defense--the foundation for her survival as a nation.

The principal threat to de Gaulle's vision for France's future was the danger of domination by either of the superpowers or simply being crowded off the international stage by their struggle with each other. The suppression of the Hungarian uprising and the erection of the Berlin Wall served to remind Europe of the stark reality of the threat posed by the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. France's junior status among the wartime Allies had taught de Gaulle that France could not play a great role as an adjunct to the Anglo-American dominated security arrangement. As France's future influence would derive from her assuming the leadership role in a unified Western Europe, the resurgence of Germany presented de Gaulle with yet another challenge. Germany could never be allowed to again pose a military threat capable of invading France. At the same time, German potential must be harnessed toward the goal of a Europe independent of US political-security dominance.

The foremost internal threat to France's national interests precipitated the very crisis that brought de Gaulle to power. The agonizing process of dissolution of the French empire produced divisions in the society and the military which threatened their stability and that of the Republic itself. De Gaulle recognized it was essential to heal

these divisions as well as the lingering loss of French self confidence wrought by the defeats inflicted during the world wars.

### FOREIGN POLICY OBJECTIVES

Independence was vital to France's national interest--to regain her grandeur and status as a respected sovereign state. To achieve the major objectives of de Gaulle's "grand design" for foreign policy, he pursued a strategy to assure France's complete independence in all military, economic and political policy making decisions. The ambitious components of this strategy included the following:

- development of a nuclear capability (an autonomous nuclear strike force and independent deterrent)--and thereby achievement of the status of inclusion in the ranks of "nuclear powers";
- French withdrawal from the NATO's unified military command structure but with continued reliance on the US security guarantee and continued participation in NATO's political arrangements,
- French leadership of a European political, military and economic continental system;
- exclusion of Great Britain from a continental system as long as she maintained her "special relationship" with the US;
- and, creation of Europe as a third world power. (Cook 334)

If France was to realize her plans to assume a new leadership role in a continental political-security system, de Gaulle had to convince the rest of Europe that his leadership

was strong enough and his goals feasible, but most importantly, that the security his design offered would be a safe and sufficient substitute for the security already enjoyed by Europe under the Anglo-American dominated security arrangements.

The first two objectives of his "grand design" were feasible in the short run because the means of their achievement lay in French hands. By accelerating the development of a nuclear capability, France acquired a credible nuclear deterrent and became a nuclear power that no longer needed to rely exclusively on the Anglo-American nuclear umbrella. De Gaulle believed that, "in order for deterrence to be effective, it is enough to be able to kill the enemy once, even if he possess the means to kill us ten times over." (215) De Gaulle could, working gradually but singlemindedly, effect the withdrawal of French forces from NATO command. Together, these steps achieved for France independent control of the means of her defense. The exclusion of Britain from the European Community was achievable because it was a negative goal for which the French veto sufficed.

The remainder of de Gaulle's objectives required the cooperation of other Western European nations and thus relied on de Gaulle's ability to convince them, using the power and resources available to him, that they would feel as secure under French direction of a continental system than they were currently under the American nuclear umbrella

## RESOURCES AND POWER

"The means at de Gaulle's disposal in realizing this objective were certainly not impressive, but he pressed on, trading diplomatic skill for material advantage " (De



Menil 25) In 1958, de Gaulle assumed leadership of a France which was politically unstable, having weathered 24 changes of government in the last 12 years and was on the verge of a civil war. The strains of maintaining her colonial empire were being felt on financial and military levels and in domestic social discord. The national will of the people had been broken; apathy seemed firmly rooted within French society. Economically, however, France was rapidly recovering from the devastation of the last world war--the Marshall Plan enabled France to experience economic affluence once again. (De Menil 1-2)

In taking control of a former "great power" burdened with the dissolution of its colonial empire, demoralized by defeat in war and racked by political and social instability, de Gaulle displayed remarkable resources of diplomacy and personality which seemed to turn weakness to strength. His diplomatic skill and ability to persevere with singleness of purpose allowed him to achieve success in maneuvering with more powerful nations. Dealing from a position of relative weakness he understood he could not afford largess but rather had to be steadfast and intransigent in pursuing his goals (Harrison 52) The stalemate of superpower confrontation afforded the opportunity for a lesser power to operate in this manner. France could withdraw from NATO, but the United States could not deny France the protection of nuclear deterrence. The Berlin Crisis demanded restraint from America which appeared to be vacillation, but France in a lesser role could be more steadfast. This championing of the German cause could only bolster de Gaulle's contention that France rather than America was the natural spokesman of Europe. (De Menil 4-5) Domestically, de Gaulle's flare for drama, his passion for French grandeur

and his call for a vigorous renewal struck a responsive chord. His diplomatic successes, many achieved with fanfare but low material cost inspired pride in his countrymen. De Gaulle fashioned himself as the symbol of resurgent French pride.

### PLANS AND PRIORITIES

De Gaulle's grand design for France, her former empire and her role in the world was integrated into a coherent whole. Revitalization of the nation and its spirit, disengagement from rebellious colonies and the creation of a commonwealth with France at its head; and emergence of Europe, under French leadership as a third power; these elements complemented each other. Disengagement from the vestiges of overseas empire freed French resources, stemmed the source of social discord, and removed the onus of colonialism. The revitalization of France's role as an important player in the international arena inspired French pride, will to greatness, and confidence. Stability and cohesion in French domestic affairs enhanced France's credibility and status as the head of her commonwealth and a voice for Europe.

De Gaulle strengthened the French presidency by revising the constitution, increasing his constitutional powers and creating political stability within the republic. He restructured and modernized the military and brought it under civilian political control. This removed the military as a potential source of domestic instability while at the same time making it a more credible and effective instrument of foreign policy. He withdrew the French military from direct NATO command and developed a French nuclear capability, enabling France to establish autonomous control over her national defense. He

liquidated the French empire, allowing France to redirect her resources and energy back into the homeland.

With these actions, de Gaulle created an increase of independence of leadership at every level. Domestically, the president was afforded the power of independent decision-making authority--this, enhanced by ready recourse to plebiscite, provided de Gaulle the means to exert personal leadership. Freeing herself from maintaining her empire increased independence of action. In international diplomacy, charting her own course clearly gave France the independence of following her own interests. Rather than allow a benign superpower to dictate policy to her, France would pursue her own interests and persuade others that her actions were reasonable, not injurious to the interests of her friends and ultimately served the interests of the wider group. Although unwavering in his ultimate design, de Gaulle stated he was "anxious to proceed gradually, linking each stage with overall developments and continuing to cultivate France's traditional friendships." (202)

### LESSONS LEARNED

Ultimately de Gaulle's policies and his actions in pursuit of them must be judged as successes not only for him and for France but for the allies he so discomfited as well. Clearly he restored to France stability, power and independence which she had not enjoyed since before World War II. Although de Gaulle did not live to see a European Community under French leadership, the foundations of de Gaulle's vision of European unity are vested in the European Union which ironically is headquartered in Strasbourg.

While his actions may have ultimately done little to enhance the strategic security of France, they were accomplished in such a manner as to not harm it. His challenges to the leadership of France's vital allies were never affronts that did mortal harm to the shield that they offered to the gravest threats to her security. Withdrawing French forces from NATO military command and developing a French nuclear force enhanced French independence and prestige, and they were steps taken with care not to diminish the security France derived from the effective protection of US deterrence.

Moreover, de Gaulle's policies helped usher in a degree of pluralism in world affairs which was a healthy turn from the bipolar stalemate. The case can be made that the existence of strong and independent allies with common goals and interests is more beneficial than a more cohesive but less dynamic bloc. The more independent course charted by France helped foster a less directly confrontational international environment. France, in pursuing her own interests in Africa or Europe could sometimes advance US interests when the constraints of superpower status prevented direct American action. In the longer view, the French assertion of independence contributed to the international pluralism that helped make possible the peaceful end of the cold war. The seeds of the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact may have been sown in the French withdrawal from NATO; and the willingness of Moscow to release Berlin and Prague must be in part due to Washington's willingness to accept the independence of Paris. Just as France helped herself by granting independence to her colonies, the United States helped herself by accepting the independence of her allies.

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